

Amina's Prophecy: Pondering Peacemaking and the Costs of War

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A few years ago, during a particularly strong period of disillusionment with my chosen career in health care, I decided that what I really wanted to do was to be “paid to ponder.” I liked the alliterative effect of those words, and it soon became my favorite phrase whenever I could find an appropriate time to do so. I would use it when people I hadn’t seen in a while asked me what was new. I would tell them this was my new goal: I was going to find a way to be “paid to ponder.” My friends, generally supportive and used to my strange and sometimes bizarre ideas about life, composed new words to the song, “Oh, I’m a Wanderer,” and changed it to “Oh, I’m a Ponderer”; they renamed screenplays or poems, such as “On Golden Pondering” and “Walden Pondering.” You get the idea. No one really took me seriously, except for me.

It was about the same time that I began my seminary application process. Now, it would seem to an outside observer that perhaps my initial desire to be “paid to ponder” was the true beginning of the journey I now find myself involved in: religious studies at a seminary. Some who have known me my whole life are not surprised by this move, and I certainly, to this point, have not heard about getting the “paid” part taken care of (I will be paying them — go figure!). But I realize that over the space of the next three or four years, I will be doing just that. I will have arranged time in my life to ponder. Imagine, time just to ponder: to think and write, and study and discuss ideas, theology and religious systems. I cannot think of anything else I would rather do. This part of my life’s journey reminds me that sometimes big events and changes in our lives begin with the introduction of small ideas that are seeded in a wish, or within an unplanned uttering, that later come to mean great things.

Today is the first day of spring. This time of year makes me want to dig into things. Not just in the literal sense, but also in the figurative sense. In addition to getting my hands into the garden, I begin to want to explore the meaning of life anew, start over, see if there is anything from the cross-referenced files of my brain that needs tossing or reexamining. Let's see: Held assumptions about so and so? Haven't worn a particular belief for a while? Does it still fit? Do I like the pattern it provides in my life?

In spring, pondering, checking for the new signs of life and staring at the sky through the ever-increasing shade of the trees becomes my favorite pastime. Like the birds chasing after last fall's twigs to create their coming babies' nests, I search the past year's events for signs that I can rejoice, make life anew, be hopeful about our future, to find that, collectively, we have built a safe place in which to give birth and raise children and live joyous and safe lives. I search to find that somehow, somewhere, we have brought something good to the world. AND, that what I have done, what I have contributed, has mattered.

A few weeks ago, in a class on Islam, I heard a young Muslim woman speak some prophetic words. Sharing her thoughts on the current state of affairs in the United States and around the world, she said, "I don't understand why people are not out on the streets every day, protesting what the U.S. is doing in Iraq, in Korea, in Sudan and is planning to do in Iran! What is happening in this country? This is supposed to be the freest country in the world, and why are people asleep? Where is our courage? We should all be scared to death at the silence! We have been systematically put to sleep with fear by our government!"

ⁱ No one answered Amina*, and her words fell off, awkwardly. A brilliant student, Amina, besides being the only Muslim woman in our class, also suffers from an almost invisible mental illness, and when she speaks, in her anxious fearful way, often says things in a style that grates on others. That day, her prophetic words went unheeded and were not responded to, as they were part of a stream of other thoughts tightly wound up with non sequiturs. While I attempted to respond with a nod of support, I could not catch her gaze, and the discussion moved on.

Yesterday, I spent the afternoon at a rally that was held to protest our involvement in the war on Iraq and our government's domestic policies. While I was uplifted by the sight of the few thousand participants who were there chanting and holding banners and signs, I found myself underwhelmed with the general feeling of excitement and passion in the crowd. I, who am old enough to remember very large demonstrations associated with Vietnam, felt sad, rather than uplifted and encouraged, at the end the rally. There was definitely something missing, but there was also something present there that I cannot fully explain. Something a bit elusive ran right alongside the loud voices chanting and shouting: it was the level of fear and fatigue reflected in participants' faces, along with a sense of lack of cohesion that I felt as I walked along the booths set up along the perimeter of the rally, where groups were hawking their particular agendas. I had the sense that we are engaged in something much more complex than what we faced 35 years ago. I realized that Amina was right: we have been systematically ground down by the current atmosphere of fear and

hatred spread by our government. We have been silenced by fear.

I bring up the image of this rally because I wonder how we can begin to answer the question that my colleague Amina asks: What has happened to us?

During the subway ride home, I pondered the demonstration. I wondered about the sadness and fear I felt among people gathered for this protest. I wondered how we could begin to address the prevalence of fear present there.

In June of 2003, only weeks into our shameful “Shock and Awe” campaign, I attended the funeral of Private David Evans, a young cousin of a dear friend. David was killed while guarding a munitions depot in Iraq. He was 18 years old, fresh faced, filled with hopes and dreams of becoming a policeman and perhaps an FBI agent someday. I sat behind his high school mates, many of whom were wearing t-shirts with a picture of David’s young child on the back and the words, “Keep the Legacy Alive,” printed on the front.

David’s pastor spoke eloquently about the importance of giving our children names that create a legacy for them to fulfill. He retold, in an extremely moving way, the story from the Book of Samuel, wherein David is chosen by Samuel to fulfill his role as king. The David of the Bible was chosen last from among his siblings because he was out tending and guarding the sheep and had to be called in from the fields. The David whose life was being celebrated the day of the funeral had also been a guard, with many siblings, and the strong similarities between the two “Davids” were not lost on anyone present.

There were politicians, teachers and mentors among the family and church members at the memorial. Almost to a person, they talked about David being called home, being called to higher work, to his work now in the realm of the Heavenly Father, to work guarding the gates of heaven, perhaps to be Jesus’ soldier now. While pondering any loss as great as this, I cannot imagine the pain his family feels. While I accept that these were the honestly held beliefs of those who spoke them, and I am grateful for the comfort they provided David’s family, I don’t happen to share those beliefs.

Now, don’t get me wrong. I am moved by the sacrifice that David made, and I honor his choice to join the Army. My eyes filled with tears, just like everyone else there that day. But mostly, beyond the tears I felt for David’s family’s loss, I was angry. Angry that this young man, so very far from home, so full of dreams, on the very edge of jumping off into a full life, died as part of a war he believed was taking place to make Americans and Iraqis alike, safer: safer from tyranny, safer from warlords, safer from chemical and biological weapons, safer from Weapons of Mass Destruction. I am angry that he, and so many others of our children, and so many Iraqis and their children that we never hear about, have died in this strange mission predicated on so many mistruths, as we have come to find out. There is so much senseless pain associated with this killing: so much death, so much suffering, so much loss. My pondering on this subject leaves me with more questions than answers.

What can call us out of our fear? What can move us from our suffering? What can give us hope again? I believe that the development of compassion has the power to do such things. If compassion, as Coretta Scott King says, is the true measure of the greatness of a community, then this might become a good and holy collective goal. Developing compassion for members of our community can be what erases fear, can eliminate the sense of separation we feel from others who are different from us; it can begin to interrupt the cycle of violence that occurs when we choose not to act for righteousness. Compassion can help us find our voice when we are afraid to speak out against injustice, wherever we find it.

If the interdependent web of life connects us all, and the action of the individual does truly affect the outcome of the whole, what do our activities to become more compassionate look like? What does a compassionate community look like? What kind of stories might be told of a community where compassion is its goal?

When I reflect upon where I have been allowed to travel, into peoples most intimate circles, at ceremonies of joy and celebration, such as at a child's dedication or at a memorial service such as David Evans', or at yesterday's march for peace, or even in a class where classmates ask difficult questions, I am humbled by the greatness of the sharing found there. Humbled and grateful for the opportunity to examine more deeply the assumptions I have yet to challenge in my life. I realize I have so much more to learn. I have more to explore, more to examine, more to ponder.

Why was it so difficult for any of us to answer Amina's question? What held us back from engaging her passion? Was it her mental illness? Was it because she is a Muslim? Or was it because she spoke the truth that day, and we were not ready to hear it? Was it our fear or perhaps a lack of compassion that silenced our responses?

A loving compassionate community? Hmm.

These are some of my spring ponderings this year: one person's view of the costs of peace-making and of war in the land of our journey together. I hope to hear you tell some of your ponderings one day. Who knows, maybe we can even ponder them together?

(* 'Amina' is not this student's name. I have changed it to protect her privacy.)